

**Testimony in Favor of SB 223**  
**Expanding Hate Crimes to include sexual orientation and gender identity and**  
**expression.**  
**by Sen Carol Juneau**

Jess Keith

In November of 2007, I was assaulted for no other reason than my sexual orientation. I did nothing to agitate or provoke my assailants who followed me as I walked alone one evening in Missoula. There were four of them, and one of me. They got out of their vehicle and repeatedly hit, kicked, and stomped on me, helpless and defenseless. "F\*\*\*\*ing dyke." "Take that lesbian."

As I lay on the ground, trying to protect myself in the fetal position, I thought, "Why is this happening to me?" "If they only knew me." "I am no different than anyone else. I am a caring, loving person who wants to be accepted and deserves to feel safe in my community."

This horrific hate crime is a simple assault as the law stands now. If I had been assaulted because I belonged to a racial or religious minority, Montana law would rightly call this a hate crime. But because I am gay, I am not included in this law. Because I am gay, no harsher consequence comes to those who take their fears, uneducated views, and anger out in a physical way on myself or my community.

I chose to stand up and go on the news to tell my community what happened. I have not given up on change. I want to be included in Montana's hate crimes law.

Most Montanans agree with me. According to a recent poll of Montana voters by a nationally recognized firm, more than 9 out of 10 (91%), Montanans believe that no one should be subjected to harassment, verbal abuse, or physical threats solely because they are gay or lesbian. More than 8 out of 10 (83%) believe that gay people deserve the same legal protections as other people. Almost 7 out of 10 (67%) say that we should provide specific legal recognition for hate crimes against people who are gay or lesbian.

So for me, for all the victims, let us together expand our hate crimes law to include gay and transgender Montanans, so we can stay in our hometowns and make them a safe place to live.

Jess Keith is a Montanan, now living in California